



## Guatemala

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, traditional Mayan leaders continued to report discrimination from some nongovernmental sources.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 42,043 square miles, and its population is approximately 12.1 million. Official census data indicates that the country's indigenous population is 43 percent, although unofficial estimates are higher.

Historically, the country was overwhelmingly Catholic. However, in recent decades, Protestant groups have gained a significant number of members. Although there is no accurate census of religious affiliation, some sources estimate that between 50 and 60 percent of the population is Catholic and approximately 40 percent is Protestant, primarily evangelical. Leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations maintain that many indigenous Catholics and some Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual ritual. Other religious groups are represented, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and, primarily in the capital, small communities of Jews and Muslims. Although many persons nominally affiliated with Catholicism or a Protestant denomination do not practice their religion actively, few citizens consider themselves atheists. There are no accurate statistics on church attendance, although various sources report that it is very high in the evangelical community and somewhat lower among Catholics.

The largest Protestant denomination is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assembly of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church. Other Protestant denominations include Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian, as well as many independent evangelical denominations. U.S. and Latin American Christian missionaries work both in religious and in social capacities, although there are no reliable statistics on their numbers.

Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of syncretistic practices than the Catholic Church, which, although it does not formally accept the practice of Mayan religious beliefs and practices among Catholics, has tolerated certain traditional Mayan practices that do not conflict with Catholic dogma. Observers maintain that some indigenous members of evangelical churches also secretly practice traditional Mayan rituals.

Catholic and Protestant churches are distributed throughout the country, and their adherents are distributed among all major ethnic groups and political parties.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion; however, the Constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

The Government does not establish requirements for religious recognition, nor does it impose registration requirements for religious members to worship together. However, the Government requires religious congregations as well as nonreligious associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as legal entities if they wish to transact business. Such legal recognition is necessary, among other things, for a congregation to rent or purchase premises, enter into contracts, and enjoy tax exempt status. The Government does not charge religious groups a registration fee. Although registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes, Protestant leaders noted that their churches sometimes were required to pay property taxes by local officials.

The Catholic Church does not have to register as a legal entity; it is so recognized in the Constitution. For non-Catholic congregations, the process for establishing legal status is determined by the Ministry of Government; the requirements do not vary from one denomination to another. A congregation must file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry. The congregation must have at least 25 initial members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious or spiritual objectives. Applications are rejected only if the organization does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears to be in pursuit of illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten the public order. There were no reports that the Government rejected any group's application during the period covered by this report. However, Protestant leaders report that their churches have found the process lengthy (lasting from 6 months to several years), and they estimate that, due to these difficulties, 8,000 Protestant churches in the country have not yet applied for or completed the process.

According to immigration authorities, foreign missionaries are required to obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of 3 months. After renewing their tourist visa once, they may apply for temporary residence. Specific missionary visas are not issued or required.

The Government does not subsidize religious groups, and no groups reported receiving national funding. The Constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction in public schools. Accordingly, when provided, such instruction tends to be programmed at the local level. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry of Education consulted with the Catholic Church and Protestant groups on the integration of general values, although not specific religious teachings, into school curricula.

The Government does not have any organized programs to promote interfaith understanding or dialogue. Nonetheless, the Government has sought the support of diverse religious groups for passage of legal statutes on the rights of children and for implementation of health and literacy programs for children. For a number of churches, social projects are the primary forum for interaction with adherents of other faiths.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

Some religious leaders were victimized by crime in previous years; however, there was no evidence to suggest that the criminal attacks were related to their religious affiliation or practices. The criminal justice system continued to be very limited in its ability to investigate any crime.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious communities are generally amicable. According to leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities, complaints from their followers of discrimination based on religion are rare.

Indigenous people historically have been dominated by Ladinos (citizens of mixed European and indigenous descent) and generally have not participated fully in the mainstream of social, economic, and political activity.

Mayan religious leaders continued to note widespread disagreements with evangelical Protestants, and to a lesser extent, charismatic Catholics. Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of indigenous practices than the Catholic Church,

whose approach in many areas of the country is to tolerate traditional practice not directly in conflict with Catholic dogma. During the Spanish colonial period, some Catholic churches were built on sacred Mayan sites. Mayan leaders report that, in a few areas of the country, Catholic priests have forbidden followers of Mayan spirituality access to these sites.

While many members of evangelical congregations are indigenous, some local evangelical leaders have denounced traditional religious practices as "witchcraft" or "devil worship" and have discouraged their indigenous members from being involved with traditional religious practices.

Evangelical Protestant churches are split between a majority group, which strongly opposes ecumenical engagement with other religious traditions, including Roman Catholicism and Mayan religious practices, and a minority group, which actively promotes an ecumenical and multicultural viewpoint.

The ecumenical movement is focused on discussion of social questions rather than interfaith discourse. For several years, representatives of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and traditional Mayan spirituality have participated in the Inter-religious Dialogue and the Foro Guatemala (the former meets every 2 to 3 months, the latter irregularly) to communicate primarily on social and political issues.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met on many occasions with leaders of major religious institutions as well as religious-based NGOs. The United States supports bilingual education based on the Mayan worldview, including core spiritual values for indigenous children. A U.S. Government grant also supports the Commission against Discrimination and Racism, which broadly fights discrimination against the indigenous population. The Embassy has promoted dialogue between leaders of Mayan and Ladino groups within civil society and within diverse religious communities, and it also has sponsored ecumenical events focused on the role of religion in the construction of peace.

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